

Meet The Man Who Accidentally Convinced People That Mermaids Are Real

Dina Spector Jun 4, 2013, 5:58 PM EDT



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Animal Planet's "Mermaids: The Body Found" imagined the mythical creatures as real hominids that evolved in the sea. *Animal Planet/Mermaids*

In 2004, a young boy found the body of something on the shore. He knelt down to get a closer look. The body had the features of a man, but it was not human. As a friend filmed, the body suddenly sprang to life. The boys fled, but footage from the incident survived.

This event is not real, but it fooled a lot of people when it first aired last year on Animal Planet as part of a two-hour special called "Mermaids: The Body Found," which speculates about the existence of mermaids.

Charlie Foley is the film's executive producer, creator, and writer. He first dreamed up the concept in 2005 and returned with a follow-up special at the end of May, "Mermaids: The New Evidence," that grabbed the network's largest audience ever — 3.6 million viewers.

Both "Mermaids" specials are science fiction — a genre that critics argue is better fodder for fantasy network's like Syfy. The plot is carried by actors who pose as fictitious scientists and fake YouTube footage of purported mermaid sightings. Many first-time viewers were not aware that the special was a hoax until a disclaimer ran at the end of the show.

The films are also loosely based on real historical events and a radical evolutionary idea called the "aquatic ape" theory.

The theory reasons that many of the human traits we have today — our lack of fur, the ability to walk upright, a thick layer of fat underneath the skin — developed because our ancestors lived by the water many millions of years ago.

There are several attributes that make humans different from apes. Fringe scientists who support aquatic ape theory argue that those distinct features can be interpreted as a sign of our watery past.

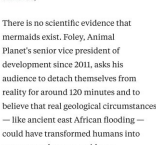
Foley uses this controversial hypothesis as the catalyst for his fictional account of the genesis of mermaids.

"If [the aquatic ape theory] is true — if humans were developing into marine animals — it would not be so hard to imagine that there is one group of humans that continued to evolve in that direction," said Foley.

His mermaid story goes something like this:

Around 6.5 million years ago, the eastern coast of Africa flooded over. The majority of our relatives turned inland, while a smaller group went farther out to sea.

The water-drawn group became what are known in modern folklore as mermaids — mythical sea creatures that are half-human, half-fish.



Charlie Foley

There is no scientific evidence that mermaids exist. Foley, Animal Planet's senior vice president of development since 2011, asks his audience to detach themselves from reality for around 120 minutes and to believe that real geological circumstances — like ancient east African flooding — could have transformed humans into permanent deep sea residents.

The transition from land animal to sea creature is not unprecedented, Foley notes. Polar bears, for example, evolved from brown bears. The white, fluffy beasts developed slightly webbed toes to help them swim and they are able to hold their breath underwater for a long time.

The idea for Mermaids hatched from another hit show that Foley created for the nature network in the early 2000s, a science fiction special that imagined dragons as real animals.

"This prompted me to think of other myths and legends that had kernels of truth," said Foley.

The magical figures have been entertaining the human imagination for thousands of years, since the time of the ancient Greeks. Mermaid stories come from fisherman's logs, early paintings, and other historical accounts. Even Italian explorer Christopher Columbus reported seeing mermaids (most likely manatees or the now-extinct Steller's sea cow) while sailing in the Dominican Republic.

The traditionally female character continues to hold our fascination: A town in Israel, Kiryat Yam, is currently offering a one million dollar bounty for the first person to snap a photograph of a mermaid.

While mermaids continue to endure in legend, Foley's fake documentary feeds into humans' innate appetite for storytelling. "We were not able to get a lot of things in the original," Foley concedes. "But we tried very hard to [make this story] plausible."